Kokua Hawaii Oral History Project Interview with
Liko Martin

Liko Martin
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Liko Martin has been described as the "Hawaiian Bob Dylan," writing Hawaiian protest songs, including "All Hawaii Stand Together" and "Waimanalo Blues," a song that* Honolulu *magazine ranks as among the top 50 Hawaii songs of all time. Martin was 25 years old when he was arrested with 31 other people protesting the eviction of Native Hawaiians and farmers in Kalama Valley on May 11, 1971. Martin was interviewed on July 17, 2017, at his home in Pauoa by journalist Gary T. Kubota.

GK: Good evening, Liko. Could you please describe your childhood and years during your youth?

LM: I grew up in Waikiki and spent a lot of time at the beach. Later, as a teenager, I sometimes performed with bands in Waikiki. So, I got to know the nightlife.

GK: Where were you staying?

LM: My parents stayed at my grandfather's place on Diamond Head Road. My grandfather was one of the sons of merchant Chung Mook Heen who financially supported Sun Yat-sen (father of the Chinese Republic who overthrew the Ching Dynasty in 1911).

GK: Oh, so you're related to the Heen family?

LM: Right. I learned to be humble and respectful, do yard work. I remember going with my grandfather to Honolulu City Hall, watching the organizing of campaigns. Politics was a part of my childhood.

GK: That was during the rise of the Democratic Party in Hawaii?

LM: Right. In those days, the candidates had music groups singing for them in caravans touring around the island. The house was full of family on election night. Everybody came over there waiting for the returns. We waited for the election returns to come from the outer islands.

GK: Did anybody discuss sovereignty and the overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy?

LM: Nobody knew about Hawaiian issues. When I grew up I wasn't allowed to eat Hawaiian food.

GK: Why was that?

LM: To be Hawaiian when I was born was not cool. I was told you ain't going to get anywhere with a Hawaiian name. I didn't know my genealogy. I didn't even have a Hawaiian name. Liko is my nickname from Spanish. I was Frederico. So, my nickname was "Liko."

GK: I understand you went to Kamehameha School?

LM: I hated Kamehameha School. It had mandatory ROTC for the boys. In seventh grade you had to have starched shirts, starch khaki pants, shined shoes and brass buckles—everything. I wasn't into it at all. I was a free thinker. My parents eventually bought a house in Foster Village, and then I ended up going to Radford High School. Radford was good. There were a lot of girls in the typing class, so I took typing. I learned English. I got out of that whole regimentation of Kamehameha School.

GK: How'd your experience at Radford go?

LM: I just connected with a speech teacher. Every week, I had to do a spot, speaking extemporaneously or preparing a Hawaiian chant. I excelled. I loved it. I also took up writing. I experimented. That experience has prepared me to do presentations and speak, and not be afraid to speak.

GK: Radford High? Wasn't that entertainer Bette Midler's school?

LM: Bette Midler and I were classmates. Bette was from Halawa Housing. She was our class president. She was awesome. She was into acting and stuff. You know at Radford, there were all the students from Halawa. We had the whole mixed ethnic thing of people. It wasn't just a "whites" only or "Hawaiians" only kind of deal. To this day, Bette calls me by an old dear name. I was the lead singer in the band called, "The Twilights."

GK: How'd that singing go?

LM: The first time I went to play music, I had to hide in the back of the old Manoa Elementary. I was afraid to come out after playing. You see all these movies of the Beatles and Elvis Presley and the girls? That's what kind of happened to me.

GK: (Laughter) How was living in Foster Village? Isn't that where a lot of military personnel and retired military live?

LM: At that time, it was almost like moving to Alabama. I couldn't go to the park. We couldn't go into the swimming pool. At night, there were vigilantes trying to chase us out.

GK: So what happened?

LM: Well, what happened was I had friends who joined the Air Force, and I joined the Air Force in 1963. I was just floundering. I was pretty much oblivious about what was happening in Vietnam. The Air Force needed typists, and I could type well. I went to Texas for training and got the highest marks in my class. So I figured, "Oh, I'm going to Europe; they're going to ship me to Europe." Well, they shipped me to Mountain Home Air Force Base in Idaho. I worked in the headquarters of the Strategic Air Command. They shipped me back to Hawaii after two years, and I worked in headquarters in the message center. Six months or more passed, and here I was in the message center and reading a coded secret message telling the pilot of these missions that you can't fire back, they can't shoot. If they get downed, that's too bad for them. And I said, "What kind of war is this? The gun pilots can't even shoot back?"

The master sergeant walked out of his office and said, "Who said that?" I was removed from the message center. I was nearly out of the Air Force anyway.

GK: Hmmm.

LM: There was something weird going on.

GK: So what happened?

LM: So after the Air Force, I ended up taking and passing the exam for the University of Hawaii. I went in as an unclassified student. My mom was happy and everything. . . I took classes in geology, geography, oceanography. I mean I loved it. They gave me the foundation to understand the physical sciences.

GK: Did you graduate? How far did you get?

LM: I was living in Hauula with my uncle, and I would drive to school.

GK: Hauula? That's like more than an hour drive and more than a two-hour bus ride.

LM: Yes. But it was cool with my car even though she had no roof or windshield wipers. On the drive, I'd have time to look for glass balls washed up on the beach.

One day, I was going up a hill, and I got into a mechanical problem. . . Well, that was the end of my University of Hawaii days, 'cause I had no way for me to go to school, and I wasn't gonna catch the bus.

GK: So what happened?

LM: I became a professional glass ball hunter after that. . . I was also writing songs, went to the Big Island and Kauai.

GK: So, what made you decide to go to Kalama Valley and get arrested with other protesters?

LM: Well, I'm not sure. Maybe, it was my experience on Kwajalein and my grandfather. He was truly a public servant and delivered speeches before the Honolulu City Council. Also, after getting out of the Air Force, I went to work with some Radford High friends on Kwajalein in the Marshall Islands for a private contractor. That was in 1968.

GK: That's where the U.S. conducted nuclear and missile tests?

LM: My work was clerical. My experience in the Marshall Islands was the most ugliest thing I've ever seen—the way the U.S. treated the native islanders. It was a total mess. On Ebeye Atoll, I've never seen people treated like that. They just pissed and crapped off a raised building. The only house of any significance that you could call a house was a hollow tile house that the chief lived in. The rest of the people lived in structures made out of plywood. It was disease-ridden. It was just an ugly, ugly, ugly scene.

GK: What happened?

LM: It caused me to write a letter to Congresswoman Patsy Mink. Eight months into my stay, I got a knock on the door—"Mr. Martin, you gotta leave."

GK: Really?

LM: The contracting officials said I couldn't stay on the island anymore, and they escorted me to the plane. I came back to Hawaii with a beard. I looked like Fidel Castro, and I felt like I was just like that. Something didn't seem right. When I came back from that experience, I began to see the poverty in Hawaii.

GK: How did you get involved in the anti-eviction fight in Kalama Valley?

LM: I forgot where I heard about Kalama Valley, maybe at the University of Hawaii. I went to check it out. It was toward the end of the occupation that I got involved. . . I didn't know anybody there, and I used to come in from the Hawaii Kai side over the trail to avoid the barricades and cops. . . Somehow, I ended at George Santos' house and got arrested. I didn't know the supporters. I didn't know if I wanted to know them or whatever. I just hung around. . . I remember the one biggest issues being discussed by the supporters, which to this day is still the question and still the paramount issue, was, "Is this a Hawaiian issue or is this a people's issue?" And that's exactly where it's at today. It has not changed.

GK: What are your thoughts on the subject?

LM: I grew up in Waikiki, a beach boy. In Waikiki, a beach boy is not into a racism. Forget it. You treat people respectfully. You treat no more nothing like that. The beach-boy thing is, make sure all the girls are covered and all the guys are covered. And everybody's having a good time. That's what it was about. Safety. You don't leave anybody behind. Everybody's included. That how we grew up.

GK: Did the arrest change your life?

LM: That was just the beginning of a walk for me. Kalama Valley was for me the introduction into what I was to become. A reporter came up to me and said, "Well, yeah, what do you have to say." The only thing I said was, "Time will tell."

GK: Your song "Nanakuli Blues" became very popular when it was released by the group Country Comfort as "Waimanalo Blues." How did the creation of the song come about?

LM: One day, Thor Wold, who wrote poems, and I were going out to Nanakuli heading to Kaena Point. He's taking notes all along the way. I wasn't really a poet back then. I played guitar, sang songs about this and that. Thor lived on the Big Island and knew all about trees and Hawaiian stuff. His father was a forester. When he went back to the Big Island, he sends me the words. He says the lyrics should be sung with "love" and "soul." I didn't know quite what he meant. So, that's why the song has two music versions—one country and the other is blues. He and I have had a long relationship. He's the mountain, and I'm the river.

GK: After the arrest in Kalama Valley, you seemed to be involved in quite a few concerts and gigs?

LM: I was writing songs for Country Comfort and had a band. The seven-piece band played at the first Diamond Head Crater Festival. We played just before Santana went on stage.

I knew the ups and downs of Waikiki, and kind of got scared of the scene with drugs and stuff in the early 1970s and moved to Kauai.

GK: I know you support the concept of sovereignty in Hawaii. What's your approach to the issue?

LM: Like Kalama Valley, this is just the beginning. No one had all the answers. Everybody had their own take depending on where they came from. How do we take the yoke off? You know? How do you cut the fish out without making it bleed? Like a friend said. . . hmm. . . that's the thing. But from then 'til now, one thing I'm sure is the underlying foundation—this is Hawaii. Since then, I've been involved in so many things. Kahoolawe, Honaunau, Hokulea. I took the permit out for the first Sovereign Sunday.

I traveled throughout the western part of America "on safari" until 1987, when in a dream I was taken under the ocean from the van I was sleeping in at a Chumash village.

When I awoke, I went down to the beach, picked up two abalone shells, left all my belongings, went straight to the airport and came home. I knew I had to come home, because something was not right when that hand came to get me. I returned home to live in nature, along the Kauai coast in a van with my wife Mariah and two children—a third would be born later.

We followed the rainbow—always the rainbow. We moved with the seasons, the fruits, the fish, limu. From Makahuena Point, went to Opihikao and Onekahakaha, Moku o Keawe, and also returned to Honaunau, to the Hale o Hooponopono. I also lived on Maui, stayed on Molokai, and then returned to Kauai, to the village of Anahola where Michael and Sandra Grace were asserting their sovereignty. From there, I was called to Washington, D.C. with Kawaipuna Prejean and Aunty Peggy Hao Ross, and then on to the United Nations, to work on our self-determination and political independence together with Alaskan natives who were assessing their inherent sovereignty. In the following years, I witnessed the increasing abuse, dispossession and removal of the people from the places where I lived. On the night of the 100-year flood, at which I was playing a concert with Willie Nelson in Lihue, we got back on the road again. I came back to Oahu, to Kaala, to be with my dear friends, Kalanipau and Loke.

GK: What else has been happening that's important in your life? I know in 2016 you and Laulani Teale went on a "Red Ribbons Tour" across the United States helping to raise awareness of Hawaiian history, focusing on the Hawaiian Queen Liliuokalani's protest of the annexation of Hawaii.

LM: Well, in the 1970s, I got married to my first wife Georgine Moore, and we were together five years and had two beautiful children, Mililani and Rudyard. I got to see my daughter in 2016 during the "Red Ribbons Tour." She came to Washington, D.C. She came with red ribbons.

GK: That must have been a sweet moment?

LM: She's a luthier, plays a beautiful violin, bass, everything. She really takes after me, loves to work with her hands. She's almost got the same kind of hands as me.